

THE MEDIUM WITH THE MESSAGE

The late Philadelphia spiritualist Arthur Ford made Bishop James Pike a believer in psychic phenomena and helped launch the occult explosion. **By NAT FREEDLAND**

In the harsh, glaring lights of the television studio, what started out as a panel discussion about life after death suddenly became a videotaped seance!

Arthur Ford, the septuagenarian dean of American mediums, had put himself into a trance. His spirit guide since 1924—Fletcher, a French-Canadian killed in World War I—was passing along to former Episcopal bishop of California James A. Pike words supposed to be from Pike's son, Jim, who had committed suicide during a bad LSD trip at the age of 20.

"I will tell you this much, Dad—he called you 'Dad'—the beginning was someone he calls Halverston," Fletcher reported via Ford's vocal cords in answer to Bishop Pike's query about the events leading up to his son's suicide. "I don't know, is the name like Halverston of Halbertson . . . He's here now, this Halverston. I've seen him here; he seems to have come over about the same time the boy did. Do you remember such a person?"

"I think I do . . . I didn't connect him," Bishop Pike replied hesitantly.

Arthur Ford went on, "Wait a minute, wait, check it out. He had . . . his name was Marvin . . . and, uh . . . something about some modern music or modern dancing, or art or something in the church, and, uh . . ."

"There's such a person," Pike broke in. He now remembered Marvin Halverston as a young man working for the National Council of Churches, director of an office studying the church's relationship to contemporary arts. The two were even together on a TV panel once, but Pike hadn't heard anything about Halverston for at least two years and had no idea his son Jim even knew Halverston.

This 1967 television seance took place in a Toronto studio of the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. After the show, Bishop Pike began making an investigation and found someone who knew that Halverston had dropped out, gotten heavily involved in drugs at Berkeley, and died a year after Jim.

Pike then journeyed to Philadelphia, where Arthur Ford had lived for well over

20 years, and arranged for a private sitting with the medium!

At this time Pike asked Jim's spirit for a fuller explanation of the events which led to his suicide. Ford reported that the breakdown began when Jim ran into "some—not old friends—but some people I had known—from the West Coast." He then launched into a detailed, lengthy narrative, naming names of living people who had been with Jim just before he killed himself. Pike was actually able to trace these witnesses and for the first time he put together the story of Jim's death.

It was this confidential Philadelphia seance, not the headline-making controversy of the televised seance, which finally made Bishop James Pike decide to write his best seller, *The Other Side*, that put him on public record as a believer in psychic phenomena and the possibility that communication with the dead can exist. More than anything else, Pike's testimony that Arthur Ford put him in touch with his dead son brought spiritualism back into the spotlight after some 50 years of obscurity. Most Americans had probably assumed that spiritualism had died out.

Arthur Ford died on Jan. 4, 1971, a few days before his 75th birthday. He had been a member of the American Society for Psychical Research since 1921 and an ordained Disciples of Christ minister since 1923. He said his first spontaneous psychic experiences happened when he was a World War I second lieutenant and saw in his dreams the exact names on next morning's list of casualties.

In 1927 he sailed to England for a look at what their Society for Psychical Research was up to. The night he arrived he went to an SPR lecture where the speaker was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes and a fervent missionary for psychic research during most of his adult life. On the spur of the moment, Doyle invited the visiting American to step up and demonstrate his budding mediumship.

The next day, *The London Express*

quoted Doyle: "One of the most amazing things I have ever seen in 41 years of psychic experience was the demonstration of Arthur Ford." Sir Arthur then went on to give a long list of Ford's psychic hits that audience members had verified as correct.

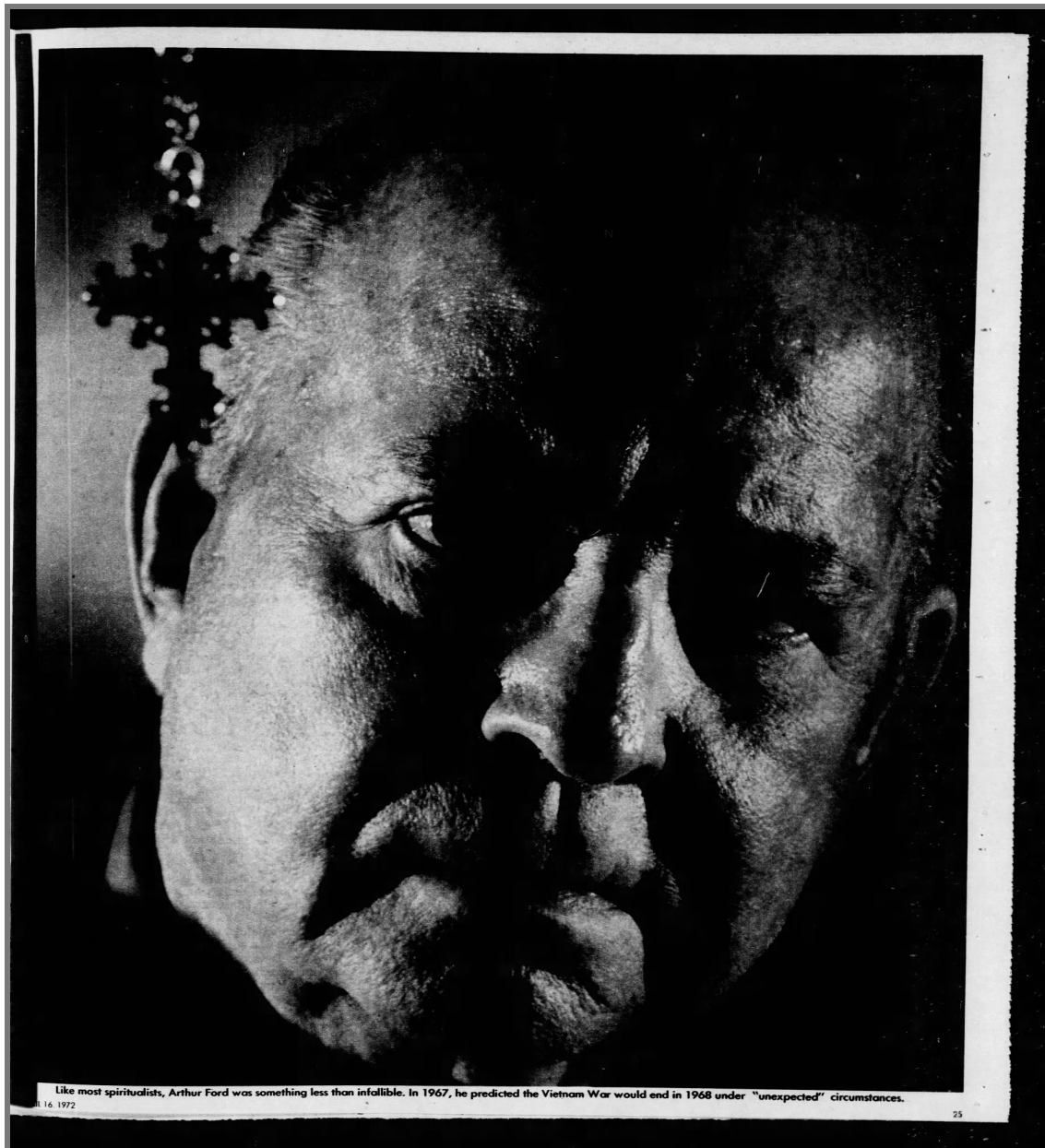
But until his involvement with the Bishop Pike case, Arthur Ford was remembered mainly for a much earlier controversy . . . Houdini's 1929 code message from beyond the grave.

When Harry Houdini, America's greatest magician, died in 1926, he made a pact with his wife, Bess, to come back in spirit and communicate, if such a thing were possible. A reward of \$10,000 was offered to any medium who could come up with the two-word code message. On Jan. 8, 1929, the old *New York Graphic* bannered a front-page scoop that Arthur Ford gave Bess Houdini the message, "Rosabelle, believe," spelled out in the "talking code" the Houdinis used for a mind-reading stunt early in their career. Rosabelle was Houdini's private pet name for Bess because of a song she sang as a vaudeville performer.

Mrs. Houdini then signed a statement that Ford had delivered the correct code message, witnessed with the signatures of a United Press reporter and the associate editor of the *Scientific American*. But two days later the *Graphic* branded its own scoop as a hoax, claiming that their reporter had tricked them by somehow finding out the code in advance. The paper hinted just short of libel that Ford, Mrs. Houdini and the reporter were all in on it together. Brought up on charges before the New York United Spiritualists League, Arthur Ford easily cleared himself. He always maintained that Fletcher brought him the code message exactly as stated and that the accusations against him were a typical smear by one of the most notorious scandal sheets from the heyday of American yellow journalism.

In the Houdini case, there have been too many charges, countercharges and denials

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for anybody to reconstruct exactly what happened. But certainly no one has ever come near proving that Arthur Ford took part in fraud. And although Houdini's widow never again publicly admitted the authenticity of Ford's message, she never denied it, either.

Throughout the '30s, '40s and '50s, Arthur Ford traveled the English-speaking world convincing thousands that he was communicating to the realm beyond human life with the aid of his trusty guide, Fletcher. Through most of this period, his home base was Philadelphia, although few Philadelphians were aware of this, then or now.

In 1956, Ford figured prominently at a Chicago meeting of psychically oriented clergymen who founded the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship, an organization attempting to get mainstream organized religion to recognize the validity of mystical experiences. Fellowship spokesman Marcus Bach, a retired University of Iowa professor of comparative religion, put it this way: "The Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship holds that the door of revelation is never closed. God still speaks directly to us. SFF points out that the Bible is full of descriptions of classic psychical phenomena interpreted as miracles; prophecy, visions, clairvoyant dreams, levitation, fulfilled prayers.

One of the most interesting personalities I met during the year I was researching my book, *The Occult Explosion*, was Bruce Gregory, 25, a good-looking, urbane financial analyst for one of the TV networks. Bruce is currently New York City chairman of the SFF.

A soft-spoken Atlanta native, he began looking into psychic phenomena at the age of 18 when he first went away to college. "Our family were all staunch Baptists so they always made light of the psychic strain running through us," he says. "I had a grandfather who could do table-rapping and a little healing. My father saw ghosts when he was in his twenties, my mother once felt she'd transcended out of her body while speaking before a church. I started reading about Rhine's ESP research in the college library and gradually things fell into place for me.

"Somehow I felt even though I was accepted for Harvard Business School I shouldn't go

Ford claimed he had held a seance for an astronaut who later wrote him that "everything checked out."

there. So I picked Wharton for my graduate studies and soon after I arrived in Philadelphia I met Arthur Ford and became active in the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship. I also learned a lot from the wonderful occult collection at the University of Pennsylvania Library. Lots of Madame Blavatsky's original manuscripts."

Bruce Gregory is convinced that his own personal experiences with the SFF have proven to him that communication with the dead exists. "A friend of mine who developed automatic-writing mediumship once brought in my Uncle Claude," he says, "describing him perfectly and capturing details."

According to National Council of Churches figures, there are at least 400 spiritualist churches and 150,000 Americans who name spiritualism as their Christian denomination. Unless you are going out of your way to look for it, the spiritualist subculture is largely invisible to the general public today. But the *Yellow Pages* of the phone book in any large American city will show at least several listings under "Churches-Spiritualist."

Spiritualism, it is not generally realized, is a social invention as authentically American as jazz. It can be traced back to March 31, 1888, in Hydesville, a village outside Rochester, N. Y. That night the adolescent Fox sisters began to attract "spirit rapping" from a ghost who eventually identified himself as peddler Charles B. Rosma, murdered years before and buried in the cellar. Bones were later dug up in the Fox cellar where Rosma said his body had been hidden.

Communication with spirits of the dead is an almost universal factor in primitive religions, but it was generally considered sorcery rather than central theology. Certainly in major Western religions and in a modern, industrial society, spiritualism was the first mass movement based on the premise that

anybody with the necessary psychic talent could communicate with spirits and pass the word along. This movement was perfectly suited to the do-it-yourself optimism of a young America's pioneer days and for a while it took off. By 1854, 15,000 convinced U. S. spiritualists sent Congress a petition demanding an official commission to investigate and verify the new revelation.

But a reaction soon set in. In 1884 a wealthy Philadelphia spiritualist named Henry Seybert willed \$60,000 to the University of Pennsylvania for an impartial research program on communication with the dead. A commission of professors was appointed and in 1887 their report branded the whole thing a fraud. Henry Slade, who claimed to be getting spirit-writing on slates, was easily detected using trick equipment and Margaret Fox's toes were observed flexing inside the shoes when her spirit raps were heard.

A year later Margaret Fox, by now a much-married, poverty-stricken alcoholic, sold the newspapers a story that the Fox sisters were a sham and then gave public demonstrations of how those "spirit raps" were produced by cracking the joints of her knees and toes. Other bogus mediums jumped on the bandwagon, too, and were making a good thing out of lectures confessing how they cheated.

However, the movement didn't fade away completely, as might have been expected. There was too large a core of committed spiritualists who would never change their minds about what they considered genuine psychic phenomena; even if many mediums were dishonest, it didn't have to prove there was no such thing as honest mediumship.

"Yes, I have come across frauds," none other than Arthur Ford admitted in an interview for the magazine, *Psychic*, of October, 1970. "When people started telling them they were wonderful, they believed it. They got greedy, egotistical and unbearable. Then they try to force it—but you can't turn it on like that... But if some woman has a husband and kids to support, and she sees five or ten bucks coming through the door, she's going to try to get it. And so she gets a bad reputation. I don't think anyone ever starts out as a fraud. There isn't enough money in it."

Gradually worsening health and cardiac trouble put Arthur Ford into semiretirement in Miami during his last several years. He gave only four trance sittings in 1970. Two were for doctors, one for a U. S. senator and the fourth "was for an astronaut who came anonymously. I didn't know who he was at the time of the sitting. Afterwards, he wrote me a very beautiful letter in which he said everything checked out."

Ford also told *Psychic*, "The day of the professional medium is about over. We've been useful as guinea pigs. I have taught a great many groups and I find they all have some spiritual gift. Any group of seven or eight people who take time to listen and read, to understand the techniques involved, and practice faithfully will generally have some psychic experience within a few months." □

NAT FREEDLAND is a staff reporter and critic for *Billboard*, the music trade magazine, and the author of "The Occult Explosion," published this spring by G. P. Putnam's Sons. A native of New York, he now lives in Hollywood.



Black Star
Already controversial before his seance with medium Arthur Ford, Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike incurred widespread ostracism for his widely proclaimed belief in psychic experience.

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